

Character Class

Dead Levels II

Character Class Companion

By Kolja Raven Lique



In this second Dead Levels article, designed as a companion to the first [Dead Levels](#), twelve alternative core classes are explored from various supplemental books, including *Complete Arcane*, *Complete Divine*, *Complete Warrior*, *Heroes of Horror* and *Player's Handbook II*. The *Complete Psionic*, *Expanded Psionics Handbook*, *Magic of Incarnum*, *Miniatures Handbook*, and *Tome of Magic* were not excluded because of bias, but rather article size constraints.

As a warning, if you are reading this material seeking powerful additions to your favorite character classes, *you are going to be disappointed*. These dead level abilities (like their predecessors) were designed to have an imperceptible impact on game balance while remaining thematically consistent to the flavor of each character class. They were created under the design restriction of having to avoid any beneficial effect during melee or spell combat. If a dead levels ability does help during combat, the advantage is exceedingly situational. For the most part, dead level abilities are meant to encourage role-playing wherever possible.

To be clear, these abilities *should not* be considered "band-aids" or "quick fixes" for perceived character class deficiencies. The purpose of these dead level abilities is rather to give players "something" instead of "nothing". As before, the dedicated spellcasting classes (that gain new spells or spells per day at every level) receive the least significant bonuses.

Not to be oblivious, the first Dead Levels article stirred up quite a cloud of dust. Whether you participated in those discussions or not, message boards both official and private discussed what a dead level "is" or "should be" exactly. While the title of my previous article (Dead Levels) definitely garnered a lot of attention, people stampeded to the material with different expectations in mind, none of which were inherently right or wrong.

Many of you expressed that certain existing class abilities should be considered dead levels, due to their virtually nonexistent or highly obscure usage. *Cough* slow fall trap sense *Cough*. I hear you, but that was not for me to decide. A poll was conducted asking people if they "really need a special ability at every level". This was largely a yes/no split, although the "yes" votes did prevail in the end. Almost everybody agreed that something needs to be done about the dead levels of certain core classes, especially when a prestige class that grants +1 level of spellcasting at every level (in addition to special abilities) is clearly more appealing. Fingers wagged at the sorcerer primarily and the cleric to a lesser extent.





For every dead level ability that was published in the first article, feedback was returned to me both "for" and "against" each idea. What this tells us, once again, is that you can't please everybody all of the time. Heck, there are still people out there who don't like Reserve feats! I know, I know, crazy talk.

With that in mind, we present the second round of dead levels adjustments--DMs take note, if (and only if) the adjustments below suit your game, we encourage you to include these enhancements for your players. Of course, you might also consider dead level adjustments of your own (more of that at the end).

ARCHIVIST

Heroes of Horror, pg. 82

The archivist, similar to the druid and rogue, has two dead levels. When a class can fill eighteen out of twenty levels with special abilities, the distinctive lack of abilities during two of those levels stands out like a beacon. The two dead level abilities presented here take into account that archivists gain two new spells at every level, reducing the significance of their dead level abilities.

Logical Mind (Ex): At 16th level, an archivist refines their deductive thinking to an efficient, objective edge. An archivist can now decipher two pages of script in 1 minute (10 consecutive full round actions), or 1 page of script in 30 seconds (5 consecutive full round actions) on a successful Decipher Script check. In addition, an archivist no longer draws false conclusions from a failed Decipher Script check.

Designer's Note: Despite the mechanical advantages of these two abilities, they are largely trumped by the fact that any archivist who placed maximum ranks into Decipher Script, a thematic skill for archivists, experiences no difficulty reading even the most obscure writing.

Academic (Ex): At 19th level, the archivist becomes so certain in the use of Decipher Script that the character can use it reliably even under adverse conditions. When making a skill check with Decipher Script, the archivist may take 10 even if stress and distractions would normally prevent the character from doing so.

BEGUILER

Player's Handbook II, pg. 6

The beguiler has seven dead levels, but gains spells per day during each one of those levels. During 2nd and 3rd level, however, and every odd level thereafter, beguilers merely gain more spontaneous spell slots per day of the spells they already know. While some of their dead levels coincide with gaining access to higher level spells, not all of them do. Regardless, the beguiler is a potent class in the right hands, and so their dead level abilities are relatively minor.

Clever Wording (Ex): At 4th level, a beguiler starts mastering the ability to verbally transmit information to another character without others understanding it. A beguiler has to fail a Bluff check by 6 or more when delivering

a secret message before false information is implied or inferred. Failure by 5 or more means a beguiler can't get the message across. See Bluff checks on pg. 67 of the *Player's Handbook*. These failed Bluff increments increase by 1 at 9th, 13th, 16th, and 18th level, when a beguiler has to fail a Bluff check by 10 or more before false information is implied or inferred.

Lively Discourse (Ex): At 12th level, a beguiler gains the ability to relay detailed messages, especially those that require specific locations, people and times. The DC is 30 to relay intricate messages with a Bluff check.

Designer's Note: These abilities are based on a single iteration of the Bluff skill. As a character class that treats lying and manipulation as tools, a beguiler will most likely take maximum ranks in Bluff. These abilities ensure that beguilers are the foremost experts at disseminating information, thereby dominating their niche.

Piqued Hearing (Ex): At 17th level, a beguiler is so attuned to conversations with secret messages that noticing them becomes effortless. A beguiler within 30 feet of a conversation containing a secret message is entitled to a Sense Motive check to intercept the transmitted message as if actively listening for it. The beguiler must first be able to hear the conversation with a Listen check.

DUSKBLADE

Player's Handbook II, pg. 19

The duskblade has six dead levels, but gains a single new spell at every level with a generous number of spell per day to cast from their repertoire. Duskblades also enjoy a full base attack bonus and can wear up to medium armor without spell failure. While their spell selection is limited, duskblades are not shy in the arcane or physical power departments. As such, their dead level ability should be restrictive at best.

Designer's Note: As every member of this character class is mentored by an elf (see Alignment, pg. 19 of the *Player's Handbook II*), elven insight has been balanced by making this ability dependant on interacting with elves. The ability is balanced by the fact that duskblades do not count Diplomacy or Gather Information as class skills, but treat Intelligence as one of their primary ability scores.

Elven Insight (Ex): At 8th level, a duskblade better understands how elves think after having pursued their ancient racial profession to this point. A duskblade can use their Intelligence ability modifier (instead of Charisma) when making Diplomacy and Gather Information checks with elves or in elven communities. At 9th level, a duskblade gains a +1 bonus on these skill checks. These bonuses increase by +1 at 12th, 14th, 17th, and 19th level.

FAVORED SOUL

Complete Divine, pg. 6

The favored soul has thirteen dead levels, but gains new spells per day or spells known during each one of those levels. The favored soul is a curious character class in that no special abilities are received at 1st level, creating something of a conceptual design void. This void is offset by having all good saving throws, but mechanical bonuses and spell choices alone can leave some people feeling cold at 1st level.

Faith Healing (Su): Starting at 1st level, a favored soul can selectively channel a small amount of divine energy when handling the wounds of a dying creature. The favored soul is so certain in the use of first-aid (see Heal, pg. 75 of the *Player's Handbook*) that the character can use it reliably even under adverse conditions. When making a

first-aid check on anybody who is within one step of their deity's alignment, the favored soul may take 10 even if stress and distractions would normally prevent the character from doing so. At 6th level, these first-aid checks heal 1 point of damage. This amount increases by 1 hit point every five levels thereafter (11th and 16th).

Knowledge Specialty (Ex): At 1st level, a favored soul can choose whether to make Knowledge (arcana) or Knowledge (religion) a class skill. Once this choice is made, it cannot be reversed.

Designer's Note: As every favored soul worships a god (see Religion, pg. 7 of *Complete Divine*), exalted presence and faith healing have been balanced by making both abilities dependant on a deity's alignment. Knowledge specialty merely offers a class skill option that was perhaps "intended" for favored souls.

Exalted or Vile Presence (Su): At 2nd level, a favored soul is more influential when interacting with people of the same faith. A favored soul gains a +2 bonus on Charisma when using any skill that treats Charisma as the key ability, but only when interacting with people who worship the same deity. This bonus increases by +1 at 4th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 13th, 14th, 18th, and 19th level. A favored soul gains one-half of this bonus (rounded down) when interacting with anybody who is within one step of their deity's alignment. When making Use Magic Device checks, this bonus also applies to magic objects that are divinely created or intelligent objects with alignments.

HEXBLADE

Complete Warrior, pg. 5

The hexblade has five dead levels, the first of which occurs at 6th level. Their hexblade's curse and aura of unluck abilities both follow a logical progression (one every four levels) as do their bonus feats (one every five levels). Hexblades consistently gain new spells per day during all of their dead levels, and so their dead level ability simply embellishes what is normally a 0-level spell to sorcerers and wizards.

Forced Omens (Ex): At 6th level, a foreboding sense of doom travels with the hexblade, as candle lights flicker, fresh food turns green, or the air becomes stale. A hexblade adds *prestidigitation* to their list of spells known. See the spell description on pg. 264 of the *Player's Handbook*. If a hexblade already knows this spell, the character may choose a different 1st level spell. As a bonus spell, *prestidigitation* cannot be traded for another 1st level spell.

Designer's Note: Despite the fact that *prestidigitation* is designed to be an ineffectual cantrip, a clever hexblade will find new and resourceful uses for this spell beyond simply creating a dramatic entrance. Keep in mind that *prestidigitation* has a range of 10 feet, can only lift 1 pound of weight, and is restricted to affecting non-living material.

At 8th level, a hexblade may cast *prestidigitation* as if augmented by the Silent Spell feat without using up a higher-level spell slot. At 11th level, a hexblade may cast *prestidigitation* as a spell-like ability, lacking both somatic and verbal components, but is still limited to their spell slots per day. At 14th level, a hexblade may cast *prestidigitation* a number of additional times per day equal to 3 + their Charisma modifier. At 18th level, a hexblade can cast *prestidigitation* at will. The *prestidigitation* spell disappears from their list of spells known at this level.

KNIGHT

Player's Handbook II, pg. 24

The knight has the unique honor of being the only character class with a single dead level. Indeed, this class boasts nineteen levels of special abilities and then nothing at 18th level. Well, that's not entirely true. Knights do

gain a point of base attack bonus (which they get every level), hit points (which they get every level), and higher saving throws of every type (which only happens once every six levels). I can't imagine why 18th level was neglected, so the following ability was created to reflect the societal influence.

Gallant Nature (Ex): At 18th level, a knight has a persuasive way of gaining favors from the aristocracy. A knight can reroll a Diplomacy check once per day, but only when attempting to influence the attitudes of nobility or royalty. A knight must take the result of the reroll, even if it's worse than the original roll. See Diplomacy on pg. 73 of the *Player's Handbook*.

Designer's Note: Having class skill access to Knowledge (nobility and royalty), this ability playfully gives high level knights a decent chance to get noticed by the prince or princess of their choice. The ability is balanced by the fact that knights do not count Diplomacy as a class skill, but treat Charisma as one of their primary ability scores.

SAMURAI

Complete Warrior, pg. 8

The samurai has six dead levels, the first of which occurs at 4th level. The samurai class is a highly specialized warrior who is extremely talented at demoralizing opponents, two-weapon fighting, and making a single decisive strike. Their primary dead level ability offers an alternate use of a daily charged ability by developing a skill that samurai are already good at using.

Breaking Stare (Ex): At 4th level, the samurai can internalize their mastery of kiai into making a subject fear for their life. When attempting to change behavior, a samurai can spend 1 use of their kiai smite ability to negate a target's Wisdom modifier for a single Intimidate check. At 9th level, a samurai negates a target's modifiers on saves against fear. At 13th level, a samurai negates a target's immunity from being intimidated for being a paladin of 3rd level or higher. At 15th level, a samurai reduces the size modifier of a target by one category. At 18th level, a samurai reduces the size modifier of a target by two categories.

Designer's Note: While breaking stare can be extremely useful, it requires the samurai to spend a daily use of a primary combat ability and only applies to changing behavior, not demoralizing opponents. Interrogator is downplayed by the fact that a 19th level samurai is assumed to have taken maximum ranks in Intimidate to better use their staredown, mass staredown, and improved staredown abilities.

Interrogator (Ex): At 19th level, the samurai becomes so certain in the use of Intimidate to change behavior that the character can use it reliably even under adverse conditions. When making an Intimidate check to change behavior, the samurai may take 10 even if stress and distractions would normally prevent the character from doing so.

SHUGENJA

Complete Divine, pg. 10

The shugenja has nineteen dead levels, but this is mitigated by their *sense elements* ability (the range of which increases by 5 feet each level) and gaining new spells known at every level (which can be considered special abilities in their own right). In choosing an element focus at 1st level, however, a shugenja immediately prohibits an entire descriptor of magic, limiting their spellcasting options, thus allowing for a minor ability.

Elemental Recognition (Su): Starting at 2nd level, a shugenja can identify creatures with an elemental subtype during an encounter from any distance. The shugenja gains a +2 bonus on

Knowledge (the planes) checks to identify such creature types, but gains no insight about their special powers or vulnerabilities. See Knowledge on pg. 78 of the *Player's Handbook*. Moreover, the shugenja can make these Knowledge (the planes) checks untrained. This bonus increases by +1 for each shugenja level the character takes after 2nd level.

SPIRIT SHAMAN

Complete Divine, pg. 14

Spirit shamans are similar to sorcerers in that spells are cast spontaneously, but different in that their spells known can be changed each day (by proxy through a spirit guide). Wisdom determines which higher level spells a spirit shaman can cast, while Charisma modifies the Difficulty Class of their spells. As a spellcasting class that requires two ability scores to access the druid spell list, with abilities that are largely restricted to incorporeal creatures, the dead level ability for spirit shamans can be somewhat generous.

Designer's Note: Elemental identification is only one part of the Knowledge (the planes) skill, and even then, elemental recognition does not reveal the strengths or weaknesses of a creature. Knowledge (the planes) and elemental recognition combined, however, will permit shugenja to recognize any creature with an elemental subtype on sight, which is thematically supported by their abilities.

Designer's Note: The key abilities for guide meld are extrapolated from the spirit guide characteristics in *Complete Divine*. The key abilities for bear, buffalo, cougar, eagle, fox, and owl are based on the ability bonuses granted by the *bear's endurance*, *bull's strength*, *cat's grace*, *eagle's splendor*, *fox's cunning*, and *owl's wisdom* spells (respectively).

Guide Meld (Su): At 8th level, the spirit shaman is constantly influenced by the characteristics of their spirit guide as the two become natural extensions of each other. A spirit shaman gains a +1 bonus on ability checks using the key ability of their chosen spirit guide. This bonus increases by +1 at 12th, 14th, and 18th level. See Ability Checks on pg. 65 of the *Player's Handbook*.

Spirit Guide	Characteristics	Key Ability
Badger	Orderliness, tenacity	Intelligence
Bear	Strength, endurance	Constitution
Buffalo	Abundance, good fortune	Strength
Cougar	Balance, leadership	Dexterity
Coyote	Humor, trickiness	Charisma
Crane	Balance, majesty	Dexterity
Crow	Intelligence, resourcefulness	Intelligence
Eagle	Perception, illumination	Charisma
Elk	Pride, power, majesty	Strength
Fox	Cleverness, distraction	Intelligence
Hawk	Awareness, truth	Wisdom
Lizard	Elusiveness	Dexterity
Otter	Joy, laughter	Charisma
Owl	Wisdom, night	Wisdom
Rabbit	Conquering fear, safety	Dexterity
Raccoon	Curiosity	Intelligence

Scorpion	Defense, self-protection	Dexterity
Snake	Power, life force, potency	Strength
Spider	Interconnectedness, industry	Wisdom
Turtle	Love, protection	Charisma
Vulture	Vigilance, death	Intelligence
Wolf	Loyalty, interdependence	Wisdom

SWASHBUCKLER

Complete Warrior, pg. 11

The swashbuckler has six dead levels, the first of which occurs at 4th level. Their grace and dodge bonus both follow a logical progression (one every nine and five levels) with no spell-like or supernatural abilities to shore up their martial skills. In keeping with their grandiose approach to combat, the following dead level ability is intended to reflect their larger-than-life celebrity as adventurers.

Seduction (Ex): At 4th level, a swashbuckler has a lascivious way of acquiring knowledge through less than diplomatic channels. A swashbuckler gains an additional use of the Bluff skill called *seduce to learn secret*. The swashbuckler can use charm, flirtation, or seduction to learn a coveted secret that is known by a nonplayer character. In order for this iteration of the Bluff skill to work, the nonplayer character must find the swashbuckler physically attractive and be in a position to actually know the secret in question. There are five kinds of secrets that can be learned with a *seduce to learn secret* check. The fewer people that know a secret, the greater their loyalty to keep that secret.

Secret	DC*	Example
Common	10	Password told to the city guard, known by 16 or more people
Uncommon	20	Identity of thieves' guild leader, known by 9 to 16 people
Valuable	30	A merchant ship hauling exotic goods, known by 5 to 8 people
Deadly	40	Plans to invade a foreign land, known by 3 to 4 people
Unutterable	50	The mental disability of a king, known by 3 or less people

*The DC assumes that the nonplayer character is indifferent. The Bluff check is modified by -20 if the NPC is hostile, -10 if the NPC is unfriendly, +5 if the NPC is friendly, and +10 if the NPC is helpful.

A typical *seduce to learn secret* check takes 1d4+1 hours and requires seduction. If the check succeeded by 10 or more, the attempt takes 1d4+1x10 minutes and only requires flirtation. If the check succeeded by 20 or more, the attempt takes 1d4+1 minutes and merely requires charm. Retries are not possible as the target becomes too suspicious.

At 9th level, a swashbuckler gains a +1 bonus on *seduce to learn secret* checks. This bonus increases by +1 at 13th, 15th, 18th, and 19th level.

WARMAGE

Complete Arcane, pg. 10

The warmage has ten dead levels, but remains unequalled in their ability to deal arcane damage. The warmage knows and can spontaneously cast virtually all of the most potent evocation spells.

Designer's Note: At most, evocation sense combined with maximum Spellcraft ranks can make warmages the single best counterspeller of the game, but only when negating evocation spells. This ability is balanced by the fact that warmages must ready an action to counterspell instead of casting a spell themselves. This goes against everything the warmage was designed to do, namely discharge grotesque amounts of arcane damage.

Designer's Note: The seduction ability can be a powerful tool in the hands of a lusty swashbuckler, but still requires that the character figure out which NPC has knowledge of a desired secret, represented by a Gather Information check. If you want to make the *seduce to learn secret* action available to all characters, simply reduce the skill usage duration to one-half the normal time for a swashbuckler of 4th level.

These are in turn augmented by bonus feats, extra damage per spell, and their ability to learn whatever new evocation spells strike their fancy. The intense specialty of warmages, however, comes at the sacrifice of a utilitarian purpose. Their dead level ability plays into their existing focus.

Evocation Sense (Ex): Starting at 2nd level, a warmage can recognize the material, somatic, and verbal component of evocation spells. The warmage gains a +1 bonus on Spellcraft checks to identify an evocation spell being cast by another creature. See Spellcraft on pg. 82 of the *Player's Handbook*. This bonus increases by +1 at 4th, 5th, 9th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 17th, 18th, and 19th level.

WU JEN

Complete Arcane, pg. 14

The wu jen has thirteen dead levels, but gains new spells at every level (which can be considered special abilities in their own right). Similar to wizards, wu jens use the same mechanic of recording spells into a spellbook (with largely similar spell lists), and can therefore prepare for any situation with enough foresight and planning. Although wu jens eventually master a single element, they are not restricted from casting the spells of other elements. Elemental mastery did, however, inform their second dead level ability.

Intuitive Spirit: At 2nd level, the watchful spirit that looks out for the wu jen also helps provide expertise. Choose one Knowledge skill. Once per day, when making a skill check with this Knowledge skill, a wu jen can reroll their skill check before any information is disclosed. The wu jen takes the better of the two rolls. At 4th level, this reroll can also be used to decipher or identify anything with a Spellcraft check, but not learn or prepare spells. At 5th level, this reroll can also be used to avoid distraction from nonmagical motion or weather with a Concentration check, but not from damage or grappling.

Designer's Note: Intuitive spirit was an effort to incorporate the watchful spirit idea of the wu jen more. Elemental bond, combined with maximum Spellcraft ranks, can make wu jens exceedingly good at counterspelling elemental mastery spells, but this is offset by the fact that wu jens do not cast spontaneously, preparing all of their spells ahead of time.

Elemental Bond (Ex): Starting at 7th level, a wu jen can recognize the material, somatic, and verbal component of any spell from their elemental mastery list (including spells that are designated as "all"). The wu jen gains a +1

bonus on Spellcraft checks to identify these spells being cast by another creature. See Spellcraft on pg. 82 of the *Player's Handbook*. This bonus increases by +1 at 8th, 10th, 11th, 13th, 14th, 16th, 17th, 19th, and 20th level.

Feedback

And now it's your turn. As mentioned in the introduction, DMs might consider their own dead level adjustments--and we'd like to hear what you'd suggest, either for the classes in this article or the core classes from the first article. Send them in to dndfeedback@wizards.com, and please be sure to include "Dead Levels" in the subject line. We look forward to hearing your suggestions!

About the Author

Kolja Raven Lquette is perhaps best known for creating *The Waking Lands* website, but he has also co-authored *Complete Mage*, *Monster Manual IV*, *Races of the Dragon* and *Weapons of Legacy*, in addition to providing material for *Five Nations*, *Complete Warrior* and various articles and enhancements for the Wizards of the Coast website.
